

Reviews

Article

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**Michelle P. Brown, A Guide to Western
Historical Scripts from Antiquity to 1600.** The
British Library, London, 1990, 138 pp, frontispiece and 52
plates.

This is a fine book. It sets out to describe and illustrate all the major literary and documentary 'hands' used in the west between Roman times and the early modern period. The aim is accomplished in a series of fifty-two excellently produced plates of a representative selection of manuscripts, drawn largely from the British Library collections, but with a significant number of early pieces from the Vatican Library and one each from the Archives Nationales in Paris and Trinity College, Dublin. The work is divided into eight sections arranged in a mainly chronological sequence under such headings as 'The Roman system of scripts', 'Anglo-Saxon scripts', 'Caroline minuscule', 'Protogothic script', 'The Humanistic system of scripts', etc., which makes for ease of reference. Each section is given a brief but very useful introduction, with particularly helpful information on the diffusion and duration of the script or scripts concerned, while each individual plate is accompanied by a description and history of the manuscript, comments on the distinctive features of its script, and a transcription of part of the reproduced passage. Any illuminations, enriched capitals and other decorations are also described. The whole is preceded by a densely packed and business-like introductory chapter, explaining the scope of the book and the palaeographical conventions employed, along with a glossary and select bibliography (including regional studies), and the work ends with a short appendix of common abbreviations and two indexes, of scripts and manuscripts.

The collection is especially rich and varied, ranging from sumptuous biblical and liturgical manuscripts, through theological, philosophical and historical texts, to administrative documents and charters, with many other categories in between. It thus provides an excellent guide to the development of writing styles for differing purposes and varying grades of manuscript over the period, and will undoubtedly prove an invaluable aid for teachers and students of palaeography as well as for scholars working in a wide range of

disciplines where the accurate reading, dating and locating of historical texts is involved. Moreover, though not perhaps an 'easy read' for complete beginners, the book is so handsomely produced that it is also likely to attract the interested non-specialist.

Michelle Brown's learning and meticulous attention to detail are evident on every page, but she never allows her scholarship to get in the way of conciseness or clarity. Her infectious enthusiasm enables her to convey a vast amount of information in a well ordered and readily accessible form. Her book admirably fills a gap in the available literature on this subject and, with its splendid set of plates, seems likely to become a standard work of reference for many years to come.

Brian Kemp
University of Reading

Ann Payne, *Medieval Beasts*. The British Library,
London, 1990, 96 pp.

This is a beautiful book and beautifully produced. Almost every page has colour illustrations taken from the various manuscripts listed on pages 12-16. These illustrations are so faithful that it is easy to see the differences in the manuscripts. The text is, to some extent, subordinated to the illustrations which are very eye-catching. There is a very brief introduction sketching the history of the bestiaries and explaining how the author is working in the same tradition by combining the different accounts of her predecessors in her own text. Each illustration is accompanied by a brief summary of the traditions linked to the animal in question and of the symbolism if there is any. A wide range of creatures is included ranging from the lion, the goat and the elephant, all real and rich in symbolism, to the unicorn, the phoenix and the basilisk, all legendary and also rich in symbolism and the less well-known, such as the Monoceros, the Dipsa and the Serra. It is, as Ann Payne says, a miscellany but a most attractive one and for those whose interest is captured the author provides a brief guide to further reading. It is to be hoped that such a painless and attractive

introduction to the subject will encourage many new readers to investigate this fascinating topic.

Peter Noble
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A.J.L. Winchester, *Landscape and Society in Medieval Cumbria*, John Donald, Edinburgh, 1987,
178 pp.

Agreeing with the author's opening statement that our images of medieval England tend to be derived from research concentrated in the southern and midland counties, a book-length study of Cumbria can hardly fail to arouse interest by way of fascinating contrasts. In an imaginative first chapter, Winchester evokes the physical hardships and cultural remoteness of the region. Cumbria's relative isolation was balanced by its position as a 'war zone' between the crowns of England and Scotland, giving it a prominence in the political life of the nation and subjecting it to the additional stress of political turmoil. The six chapters which follow focus on specific themes which reflect the author's primary concern with landscape history. Chapter 2 deals with 'lordship and territory' and examines the case for continuity of the region's medieval territorial boundaries with pre-Conquest divisions. Land tenure within the baronies is examined to reveal contrasts between the directly controlled baronial forests of upland areas and the subinfeudated manors of lowland areas. Chapter 3 gives an overview of rural settlement changes between 1100 and 1550. The sparsity of Domesday evidence shrouds the early part of the period in some mystery but the data for the thirteenth century paints a familiar picture of settlement expansion. Some hints of increasing pressure on communal grazing form a prelude to a full-scale collapse of the rural economy in the wake of plague, murrains, climatic deterioration and war in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. There are few new insights here into the relative importance of these factors but the

additional political troubles of this war-torn region are graphically illustrated. Chapter 4 discusses the organisation of the medieval farm in upland and lowland Cumbria, largely from the view point of field systems and land-tenure, with little information on agricultural technique. Topics include the regulation of communal grazing, the use of infield and outfields, and the structure of landholding. Chapter 5 sets out to prove that moorland and fell was 'subject to the most stringent and, indeed, complex regulation by medieval society', and this it does admirably in a discussion of transhumance and the shieling system. Winchester's book forms a worthwhile contribution to our understanding of a little-known region of medieval England. Particular strengths lie in the explanation of landscape history and its relation to broad social and economic forces. For the political history of the region, or for a firmer picture of the society that lay behind the making of the landscape, the reader will need to search elsewhere.

Sarah Wilmot
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Robin Neillands, *The Hundred Years War.*

Routledge, London and New York, 1991, 303 pp.

This lively account of the long and complicated struggle between the Kings of France and England is intended for the general reader. As a result there are no notes and the bibliography is relatively short confining itself to the main authorities on the period. There is an index and the book is well supplied with maps which are for the most part extremely clear and helpful. The family trees are also clear and informative although it is a pity that the first one, *Dynasties of England and France 1196-1377*, is spread across the spine in such a way that some of the names are quite difficult to read. The later family tree does not suffer from this handicap. In general Robin Neillands makes his way sure-footedly through the tangle of issues and families which were involved in the war. He actually begins his account in 1415, a device which certainly catches the attention of the reader and

introduces him or her to one of the best known episodes in the whole war, the Agincourt campaign. He then returns to what he sees as the start of the struggle, the marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II of England with a brief explanation of the struggle between the sons of the Conqueror for power after his death. The narrative is written with professional skill and is certainly an interesting and gripping read. There is some repetition in the early stages, particularly in the chapter on *Arms and Armies*, which repeats in more detail information made available earlier, but otherwise the reader is led effortlessly through each stage of the conflict. The closing stages of the war are treated in rather less detail than the earlier parts, or at least that is the impression given. Clarity is not sacrificed but a great deal of information is packed into the last three chapters and there is a contrast with the rather more leisurely narrative of the earlier chapters. On the whole the proof reading is good, although there are one or two mistakes. Some are very minor, such as the 'finaly' on p. 161, but on p. 69 January 1332 should surely be 1333. Such minor blemishes apart this is a most useful book for the interested amateur and will certainly be extremely helpful to scholars for a quick overview of the whole period.

Peter Noble
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Nigel Saul (ed.), *Age of Chivalry. Art and Society in Late Medieval England*. Collins and Brown, London, 1992, 144 pp.

Five of the chapters of this book were originally published in November 1987 in *History Today*, an issue which concerned itself with the exhibition then on show at the Royal Academy, 'The Age of Chivalry. Art in Plantagenet England 1200-1400'. This book adds an introduction by Saul and three further articles by Ramsey, Draper and Sekules on allied themes. It is a pleasant read, full of well-produced illustrations, although these are not integrated with the text. Only rarely do the authors guide the reader to the page numbers of photographs relevant to the topic under discussion. Some important

items are treated at length in the articles, such as the Corpus Christi Swan mazer (p.58), but are not illustrated. Other items which are included in the illustrations do not receive much mention in the text. I also found some of the captions rather annoying. Is it really necessary to introduce a pseudo-modern tone with 'And now a word from our sponsor ...' when including a photograph of a window which features the man who commissioned the work? Even though this book is aimed primarily at the interested amateur one might doubt whether such a patronising tone is appropriate.

All of the articles present the salient themes of the period clearly. Some are more vibrant than others. Janet Backhouse's study of 'Illuminated Manuscripts' comes across very effectively, largely because it focuses on the major manuscripts and provides a good balance between detailed analysis and overview. Some of the articles, particularly those by Saul himself on 'Culture and Society' and 'Patronage', and by Peter Draper on the 'Architectural Setting of Gothic Art' are rather too general in tone. It is a shame, perhaps, that the latter does not deal with much after the mid-thirteenth century. Juliet and Malcolm Vale give some fascinating examples of how religious and secular concerns merged in chivalric celebration. Veronica Sekules urges us, despite problems with the evidence, not to disregard female patronage of the arts in this period. Brian Stone draws links between kingship in reality and as portrayed in the popular Arthurian texts.

Both Nigel Ramsey and Pamela Tudor-Craig focus on more tangible themes. Ramsey show us how works of art might have been commissioned and warns us of the dangers of assuming that medieval patrons thought and operated much as do their modern counterparts. Tudor-Craig emphasises the artistic glories to be found in the wall paintings of parish churches, reminding us not only of late medieval techniques and subject matter but also of the financial and technical problems which arise today in conservation work. These two authors draw links between past and present which are much more sensitive and helpful than those of the caption writers.

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